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UK's biggest ISPs under fire for snooping

Leading ISPs are facing criticism from subscribers and privacy campaigners after revealing plans to employ Phorm technology to target adverts at customers.

Phorm logs users' surfing habits – including sites visited, search terms used and the content of web-based email – and allocates surfers a unique and apparently secret number to tailor advertising.

Consumers are angry that the decision to share data has been taken without consultation, and that the ISPs are pimping private details for profit.

"I don't look at adverts anyway," said Nick Ryan, an accountant from Surrey. "They might say that this technology is for my benefit, that I'll get fewer irrelevant adverts, but that's nonsense – it's about making money from me and my private details without my consent." He says he'll be leaving his ISP if they implement the service without giving him the chance to opt out.

"They haven't asked me if I want this intrusion. They've just gone ahead and assumed I will accept."

Phorm – linked to a former adware company called 121Media – stirred up a hornets' nest when it announced that the UK's biggest three ISPs had signed up to its Open Internet Exchange (OIX).

The company claimed that OIX "will create a new marketplace for online advertising that is based on internet users' anonymous browsing activity and ensure consumers receive fewer irrelevant ads".

BT, Virgin Media and TalkTalk all stand to profit from a share of advertising revenue and have tried to turn the revelation into a good news story, citing some security enhancements provided by the service.

However, subscribers don't appear to want anyone logging their surfing history, even if the ISPs and Phorm claim the information will remain confidential.

BT says it hasn't decided whether it will allow subscribers to opt out of the service, but says it has been swamped by calls from customers asking about it. However, it has admitted that it ran technical trials in 2006 with no consent from customers.

"There's always a demographic who are concerned about privacy and this was considered before we

started the trials, and will continue when and if we use this service beyond the trial period," said a company spokesperson.

"We haven't decided if it will be opt-out or opt-in, but what we will ensure is that it can be easily turned off, and that if it is turned off it will not require you to remove cookies after each session."

TalkTalk has said its system will be opt-in, while Virgin has yet to make a decision.

Phorm has been at pains to appear transparent but a report by the 80/20 Thinking consultancy, commissioned by Phorm, said: "A system that matches users' web-surfing habits to adverts must ensure sensitive sites are blacklisted from tracking."

Phorm asserts that emails, credit card details and information on secure websites would not be tracked, but sceptics remain concerned that a third-party company should even have access to such data.

One respected government advisor panel has branded the system illegal for breaching the Regulation of Investigatory Powers Act 2000 by employing "unlawful interception".

"This activity involves the processing of personal data about internet users," the Foundation for Internet Policy Research wrote in an open letter to the Information Commissioner. "That data may include sensitive personal data, because it will include the search terms entered by users into search engines, and these can easily reveal information about such matters as political opinions, sexual proclivities, religious views and health."

"Users are apparently to be allocated pseudonyms for some of the processing, but at various processing stages the personal data can be linked to the pseudonym, the pseudonym can be linked to the IP address, and the IP address can be linked to the user. It cannot comply with data protection principles."

Phorm says it believes its technology complies with all relevant privacy laws and points out that some elements of its system, such as the anti-fraud protection, will benefit users. Whether such assertions will be enough to prevent subscribers leaving ISPs using the technology is another matter.

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Free Battlefield Heroes arrives online

Would-be gamers unwilling to pay for high-specification computers and pricy packaged software are set for a treat when EA launches the online multiplayer version of Battlefield Heroes in the summer.

Industry insiders tell us the game is a snapshot of everything trendy in the games arena. It is free to play because it is supported by advertising. Micropayments for optional weapons upgrades will also boost the coffers.

The game turns its back on some of the intense graphics that prevent many computer users gaming. This potentially thrilling shoot-'em-up will run on a laptop. The minimum specification will be a paltry 1GHz processor, with 512MB RAM and integrated graphics.



Battlefield Heroes will be free to play

Lightweight laptops lead price crash

Computer shoppers have never had it so good – that's the claim of anxious manufacturers who fear that prices could tumble in the wake of low-priced sub-notebook machines such as the Eee PC from Asus (see *Labs* on page 102 and also *Mobile Expert* on page 178).

Sony executives last month expressed concern that should the £200 sub-notebook from Asus thrive, it could affect laptop prices across the market. Since the Eee PC remains out of stock at many retailers, it could be time for manufacturers to press the panic button.

"That's what we're hearing from other vendors, too. There has been a sudden surge in the popularity of low-cost laptops," said Eszter Morvay, a senior research analyst for IDC's European Personal Computing group. "It's really upset the pricing of the whole industry and so we're suddenly seeing an impact on price bands. Everything is getting cheaper."

"You have to look at the Eee PC and it's pretty limited at the moment, but it fills a gap in the market and it's changing all the time," she continued. "People might already have a desktop or a full-spec laptop as their primary machine, and they don't need to spend as much on another computer."

Intel says it has also noticed a change in the expectations of many consumers. During the past few months the company has seen its cheapest laptops – which were originally destined for classrooms in the developing world – increasingly being targeted by bargain-hunters.

"During the last quarter, we have seen tremendous interest in the Classmate PC from customers outside education," said Tom Rampone, an Intel vice-president and general manager of the company's Channel Platforms Group, adding that the Eee PC had helped boost interest in low-cost laptops.

Intel now plans to make the laptops available to anyone willing to pay the sub-£200 price attached to the second generation of Classmates.

"This is a very big deal," Laura Didio, an analyst with Yankee Group, told *Computer Shopper*. "These prices for laptops would have been unthinkable a year ago."

Asus has already responded to the demand for the Eee PC with a fresh set of laptops, including machines with a larger 9in screen and bundled with Windows rather than Linux. Other vendors have also piled into the arena, all of them hoping to capture a share of the cheap laptop market.



▲ The Eee PC has led to a boom in cut-price laptops that has manufacturers worried

"The big difference here is that before these new sub-notebooks came along lightweight laptops were the preserve of executives," said Morvay. "Now they are so cheap that mainstream manufacturers may have to lower prices of full-spec laptops just to keep machines moving off the shelves."

No fewer than seven rivals have thrown their hat in the ring, and we outline what's in the pipeline below. Note that this information is gathered from press sources, leaks and market speculation, so we'd recommend waiting for reviews before parting with any cash.

THE NEW WAVE OF SUB-NOTEBOOKS

INTEL CLASSMATE

Manufacturers on both sides of the Atlantic are expected to sell a second generation of Intel's Classmate PC at less than £200, although specifications remain top secret. The laptop is expected to be bigger than most mentioned here, but with Intel's name behind the project, specifications could impress.



basement pricing. Limited availability is expected, but cautious shoppers might want to wait for reviews before parting with a deposit to secure early editions.

MAXDATA S.BOOK

The stylish s.book 1 differentiates itself from the crowd with a removable Bluetooth Skype VoIP handset phone built into the chassis and Windows XP Professional Edition as standard. Based on Via's NanoBook platform, the 1kg laptop has a 7in, 800x480 touch-sensitive display, a four-in-one card reader, Ethernet, WiFi, USB and DVI connections. It's around £350, but it is already available.

MSI WIND

With a 10in display and options for both solid-state and 2½in hard disks, the Wind looks well placed to rival Asus's Eee PC, especially given its 1GB of RAM. Tipped to run on a custom-built Linux operating system, there could be an optional Windows version. Rumours suggest the laptop will use Intel's Atom platform and run for upwards of six hours on one battery charge. Pricing is expected to start from £220, but the launch date is still under wraps.

EVEREX CLOUDBOOK CE1200V

Based on Via's Nanobook laptop blueprint, the Cloudbook is priced at £340 and includes a 1.2GHz C7-M processor, 512MB of 533MHz DDR2 memory and a 30GB hard disk. There's a 7in, 800x480 display and rumours of a Windows version, too, although first-look reviews from the US have been disappointing.



ACER 'EEE PC KILLER'

Scheduled for release "later this year" and rumoured to be pitching for a price £25 below the second-generation Eee PCs, Acer's as-yet unnamed offering is setting its sights on the budget market. Currently, 7in and 9in versions are planned, but Acer is remaining quiet about specifications. Whether its first attempt can trump Asus's second-generation Eee PC remains to be seen.

ECS G10IL

Based on Intel's Atom processor and Diamondville platform and sporting an 8.9in or 10.2in screen, the G10IL will come with either Linux or Windows XP installed. Like upcoming Eee PCs, this sub-notebook will have options for a solid-state or conventional hard disk for added storage and also have HSDPA wireless data access onboard, as well as WiFi. The 260x180x29mm G10IL will use Intel's 945GSE chipset and pack in up to 2GB of memory.

ELONEX ONE

Elonex plans to make the UK's first sub-£100 laptop available from June. The laptop, with a 7in screen, will run a Linux operating system and standard package of software tools. WiFi and Ethernet provide network connectivity, but 1GB of Flash memory reflects the bargain-

IN BRIEF

FIREFOX 3 READY TO GO

Mozilla says Firefox 3 – the latest version of the free web browser – is ready for download, although, confusingly, it won't be officially launched until June.

The software is currently on beta release 4 and, according to the developer, the update includes improvements to the download manager, as well as numerous bug fixes for improved stability.

SONY SCRAPS 'BLOATWARE' FEES

Sony has performed an embarrassing volte-face by bowing to pressure and scrapping the \$50 (around £25) fee it had been charging customers to remove free bundled software from laptops.

The 'fresh start' option to remove trial programs from Sony and third-party vendors had proved unpopular with consumers. The preinstalled software has been dubbed 'crapware', because it has limited value and a high nuisance factor.

ONLINE CENSORSHIP 'IS A TRADE BARRIER'

The European Parliament believes internet censorship should be treated as a barrier to trade and voted 571-38 in favour of a proposal to "consider all unnecessary limitations to the provision of those European services to be trade barriers".

The move means countries that restrict internet access, such as China and Cuba, could be subject to trade sanctions.

MOBILE LIFT-OFF

Google says internet use among mobile phone users has gone through the roof in recent months since the company introduced faster browsing on certain handsets. It says the arrival of all-inclusive internet tariffs and improvements in mobile phone browsing software had led to a 'watershed' for browsing on the move.



Kids' charities slam ISPs

Internet service providers (ISPs) have come under fire from child-protection charities for failing to ensure that child-abuse images are blocked in the UK.

The government wants all ISPs to filter out the Internet Watch Foundation's (IWF) list of sites containing such images, but nearly four months after the deadline for inclusion five per cent of surfers use connections that do not block the material.

According to Ofcom, there were 17.5 million home broadband connections in the UK last December, meaning almost a million consumers are unprotected.

"Ninety-five per cent is frankly just not good enough – it really should be 100 per cent. The government has said it's not satisfactory," said John Carr, executive secretary at the Children's Charities Coalition for Internet Safety. "The government has said that if the ISPs don't sort it out themselves then they will regulate."

The ISPs still serving up child-abuse websites are mostly small providers, but include some of the UK's brightest stars. NewNet, for example, has yet to sign up to the scheme, yet carried off the best consumer broadband award at the ISP Association's annual gongs, which are supposed to represent 'best practices'.

NewNet is by no means alone and insists it plans to be working with the IWF's list "as soon as possible". The company cited high costs and administrative

problems as its reasons for not having met the government's 2007 target.

"We had a number of discussions with the Home Office last year and in November they told us that they wanted everyone signed up to the list by the end of the year, which didn't give us much time, as there are quite a lot of things we need to do on the network," said Peter Milford, regulatory affairs manager at NewNet.

"The IWF might talk about it costing only £500 to get involved, but by the time you have altered the network it might cost us £150,000; it all depends how the network works."

The Home Office praised the work of the industry in mostly supporting the scheme, but hinted it might force the few ISPs still carrying child-abuse imagery to start blocking the sites.

"The Home Office is working with a number of smaller ISPs to identify ways in which they can implement blocking economically," a spokesman said. "We will continue to consider what further action or measures might be needed."

However, Carr took a hard line on anyone suggesting cost considerations should drive decisions on using the IWF list. "While it's technically possible, the expense must be accepted as part of the cost of doing business," he said. "If businesses don't see it as such or think it's too expensive then they are in the wrong business."

Vista update leaves users vexed

Microsoft has released its long-awaited Service Pack 1 (SP1) update for Windows Vista, promising performance, stability and security benefits. However, many users have complained that, as a result of driver issues, the update has crippled their computers.

Under the download service, every update is different and depends on what other software users have running on their machines.

According to Microsoft's Nick White, users can download the update directly from the company or wait for it to update automatically in April, but warned that users "may have to download and install some other prerequisites before the update can be applied".

These requirements include updates to third-party vendor software and certain elements of previous Vista

updates. Old RealTek, Intel and Symantec drivers, for example, prevent SP1 being installed.

The confusion and complexity has led to a number of complaints from disgruntled consumers after their systems either crashed or they lost functionality after the upgrade.

One UK poster on the Vista blog summed up the opinions of many users, who felt the update was overcomplicated and understated.

"So did the genius who released to auto update have any idea of what ordinary, non software/computer-savvy people are going to do when the upgrade nukes their internet connection?" he wrote. "This release isn't just flawed, for the ordinary computer user it is a complete and utter nightmare."

Holy smoke, it's the bat-plane

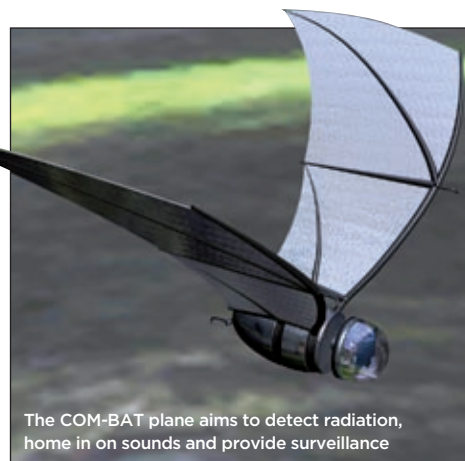
A six-inch robotic bat could be sniffing out dangers in war zones, after the University of Michigan landed a £5 million grant to develop an all-seeing, all-hearing flying snooper.

The COM-BAT plane's engineers will focus on microelectronics and develop sensors that will enable it to detect radiation and poisonous gases as well as home in on sounds and movement.

Low-power miniaturised radar and a very sensitive navigation system would help the bat find its way, while energy scavenging from solar, wind, vibration and other sources would recharge the lithium battery.

The bat would be designed to perform short-term surveillance in support of advancing soldiers.

"Bats have a highly attuned echolocation sense, providing high-resolution navigation and sensing ability even in the dark, just as our sensor must be able to do," said Kamal Sarabandi, the project's director.



The COM-BAT plane aims to detect radiation, home in on sounds and provide surveillance



Chips to fight silicon piracy

Computer engineers at the University of Michigan believe they have found a way of eliminating the growing problem of hardware piracy by creating self-protecting chips. Those manufactured with the Ending Piracy of Integrated Chips (EPIC) technology won't work until they have proved their authenticity.

Hardware piracy – making knock-off microchips based on stolen blueprints or reselling rejects on the grey market – is a burgeoning problem, and the researchers claim bootleggers use the chips to make counterfeit MP3 players, mobile phones and computers.

Pirated chips are often almost impossible to distinguish from the original, despite the fact that they often use cheaper materials and have a shorter life expectancy than the genuine hardware.

"Pirated chips are sometimes being sold for pennies, but they are exactly the same as normal chips," said Igor Markov, associate professor in Michigan's department of electrical engineering and computer science. "They were designed in the United States and

usually manufactured overseas, where intellectual property law is more lax. Someone copies the blueprints or manufactures the chips without authorisation."

Chips manufactured using EPIC protection would contain a few extra switches that act like a combination lock and create a random 64-bit random identification number using encryption techniques.

In the EPIC framework, chips wouldn't work correctly until activated. To do this, the manufacturer would plug it in and let it contact the patent owner over an ordinary phone line or internet connection.

"All chips are produced from the same blueprint, but differentiate themselves when they are turned on for the first time and generate their ID," said Jarrod Roy, another scientist working on the project.

The chip would transmit its ID securely to the patent owner. The patent owner would record the number, figure out the combination to unlock that particular chip and respond securely with the key. Any bootleggers would be left out of the loop.

SOS backup for laptops

SanDisk says it has turned the humble SD/SDHC memory card into a reliable backup tool for laptops to guard against hard disk failure or coffee spillage that could wreck files on a notebook.

The company's new FlashBack device is a simple SD/SDHC memory card adaptor that slips into a laptop's ExpressCard slot, but the device's software automatically backs up and encrypts the owner's data to the disk as they work. Should disaster strike, SanDisk says users could retrieve any information up to the point of failure.

"We all know that we should frequently make backups of our critical files," said Matthijs Hutten, SanDisk's senior product marketing manager for accessories. "Most of us don't get around to it, but this does the job automatically. So if your PC suffers a breakdown, you can flash back to your latest files."

If your notebook dies on the job, SanDisk claims you can restore data from the memory card on any PC that uses Windows 2000, Windows XP or Windows Vista and has an SD memory card reader.

The FlashBack goes on sale this summer for around £15 including



▲ The FlashBack adaptor will back up your data to a memory card

VAT, memory card not included. Users should beware that since it will be embedded in your laptop, the FlashBack is not going to help if you leave computer in a taxi after a night out or have it stolen.

Ten years of the MP3 player

The MP3 player is 10 years old. It made its debut just after the Spice Girls' run of number one hits came to an end when *Stop* did just that at Number 2 in 1998. Since then, the shape of music has changed more dramatically than Michael Jackson's nose.

The MPMan F10 from Saehan Information Systems in Korea went on sale in May 1998 weeks after taking a

bow at the CeBIT technology show. It was the first time music fans could listen to music on the move without carrying tapes or CDs, although only the shortest of albums would fit on to the paltry 32MB of memory.

Three years later came the launch of the iPod, which moved the medium into the mainstream, and continues to lead the field nearly seven years later.

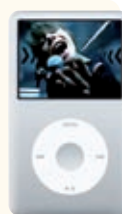
THEN

The F10 launched with just 32MB of solid-state memory and cost an eye-popping £200 when first sold in the UK. Touted as 'ultra-portable', the 91x70x16.5mm device was brick-like by comparison to modern players, and the parallel port meant slow transfers. Rechargeable NiMH batteries tested user patience with a woefully short charge span, especially given the extremely basic black and grey LCD display.



NOW

Leaving aside the iPod Touch and Nano, which take sexy and portable to new heights by comparison, we'll contrast an iPod classic at a similar price. Now £200 buys you 5,000 times the storage capacity in a 103x61x13mm 160GB player. The battery lasts 20 hours if playing music, which is transferred at USB2 speeds. Then there's the colour screen, the video playback and the accessories – we've come a long way in 10 years.



IN BRIEF

WHO NEEDS FRIENDS?

A husband was reportedly left with an £11,000 bill after his wife downloaded four episodes of the TV series *Friends*. The sitcom fan had apparently queued the episodes at home in the UK, but when the man arrived on a business trip to Germany the laptop automatically found a local provider to continue the process – but at expensive international data roaming rates.

GOOGLE GOES WIRELESS

Google plans to foster a new generation of wireless devices that would provide roaming internet access using the space left unused by changes in TV broadcasting in the US.

The company calls the technology WiFi 2.0 or WiFi on steroids, but has yet to reveal more details and said it would operate low-power devices in the 'white spaces' between television channels. With the UK switching to digital television, the move could be replicated this side of the Atlantic.

BROADBAND BOOST

University of Bangor researchers claim to have developed a broadband accelerator that could boost net speeds a hundred-fold.

The set-top-box-sized widget promises to squeeze 100 times more data over optical cables than is currently possible, allowing end users to download 15 films in a minute, but only over optical cables. Most of the UK still uses copper cables, so the technology may be ahead of its time.

ACCESS ALL AREAS

Apple hopes to launch a subscription model for music that will give customers access to its entire iTunes catalogue for either a fixed monthly fee or by paying a premium on its iPods and iPhones.

The company is reportedly in negotiations with the major record labels over its plans.



IN BRIEF

POWER PRICE HIKE

PC buyers face a price hike for portable power after a fire in South Korea wiped out a major battery supplier. According to Dell, a fire at LG Chem caused the problems and "pricing would be impacted by current availability".

Taiwanese manufacturer Asus said shipments could also be delayed by the power crunch.

YAHOO! GETS SOCIAL WITH GOOGLE

Yahoo! says it plans to work with fierce competitor Google to improve interoperability between social networks.

The company plans to join the OpenSocial network initiative, which aims to make add-on software such as Scrabulous work across networks such as MySpace, Friendster and LinkedIn.

PARENTAL CONTROL 'DOESN'T WORK'

Parents who believe that child-protection software makes children safe online should think again, according to a report by the Institute for Public Policy Research. Children are computer-savvy enough to work a way around blocking software. One 14-year-old told researchers: "We have restrictions at school but we can just get an administrator's account and take them off."

FRESH TALENT FOR SOLID-STATE DISK

US memory maker Super Talent is set to launch a 256GB solid-state disk (SSD) drive for laptops. With a SATA-1 interface, the manufacturer says the 12.5mm deep drive could be easily switched with conventional spinning disk laptop storage for faster access.

GOOGLE INVESTORS GET TOUGH

Google shareholders plan a tough stance on corporate responsibility after filing demands ahead of the company's annual meeting. Investors have proposed a company ban on proactive censorship and hosting user data in countries that restrict free speech. Shareholders have also demanded the company set up a committee to see how Google's global policies impact on human rights.

Networks at risk from foreign super-hackers

Government departments and big corporations face a growing threat from networking equipment that has been doctored during manufacture in the Far East, according to a leading security expert.

"There's a huge threat from the fact that so much of our networking equipment is manufactured in the Far East and then installed in important networks," Ken Munro, managing director of SecureTest, told *Shopper*.

"The kit comes from a 'western' vendor, so perhaps we assume it is safe, but in some countries where professional processes are hard to control – especially if it's state sponsored – anyone could get at the hardware and alter the firmware.

"If they have had access to the kit they could install firmware and have complete access to compromised systems. It's not just China but all over the Far East."

Firmware is the software that controls how networking equipment works, from home networks to national infrastructure. The biggest problem, said Munro, is that there are no tools for inspecting what is happening in the firmware of network equipment.

"You can't detect it because there is no way of scanning the software," he said. "There's very little that can be done because, at the moment, no-one is looking at the firmware [and] no-one's writing software to counter the threat. The government does some testing, but it's not ongoing."

According to Munro, the best advice for worried consumers is to update the firmware on any networking

kit during installation and completely replace it with the latest firmware from the device's vendor.

The warning comes at a time when there are growing concerns about the rise of hacking in both China and Russia.

Last year, government officials acknowledged that 10 Whitehall departments were being regularly targeted by computer hackers from countries such as China and Russia. The security service MI5 sent a letter to 300 UK companies warning of the threat from Chinese hackers attempting to steal sensitive data.

"It's crazy that we just buy this stuff and install it," said Munro. "We wouldn't buy a weapons system from a foreign power and accept it will work as they say, so why do the same thing with critical network gear?"

MI6's HQ in central London is one of the targets for foreign hackers



Report slams computer waste mountains

UK consumers and local government are not doing enough to recycle waste electronic kit, according to a report from Fujitsu Siemens Computers (FSC).

The company has called for all local councils to set up specialist recycling units for computer waste. Currently only one in 10 computers is disposed of in an environmentally

friendly way. In fact, 12.5 million computers that could have been re-used or recycled have been sent to landfill in the past five years.

Perhaps most shocking is that even when consumers do take the trouble to follow guidelines, many council tips are simply inadequate.

"Although our survey showed that one in four people do take

their rubbish to their local tip, unless their laptop or PC is assessed on the site, there is no guarantee it will be passed on for re-use or recycle," said Dave Pritchard, senior technology strategist for FSC.

"This is a huge missed opportunity. At present, just 26 per cent of IT waste is recycled, out of 94,600 tonnes collected. With the right facilities these thrown-away units could easily be reused elsewhere and those facilities need to be at the municipal sites where people drop off their waste."

Government is not the only target of the report. Consumer laziness is equally to blame for the growing silicon slagheaps. The FSC survey found that many people make no attempt to recycle IT hardware, with over a million people saying they had dumped a computer or laptop in their household rubbish and 250,000 admitting to dumping computing kit in the countryside.

"Only one in 10 people in the UK claims to have recycled PCs as recommended by the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) Directive, which came into effect last year," said Pritchard.

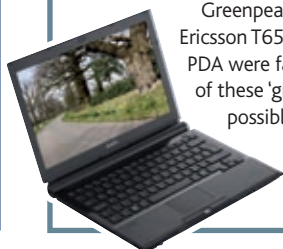
Manufacturers "have a long way to go"

Greenpeace says computer and consumer electronics manufacturers need to up their game and take responsibility for the entire life cycle of their products if they are to call themselves environmentally friendly.

A recent report by the campaign group highlighted progress, saying several products showcase toxic-free innovations going beyond current regulations. Others show clear efforts to improve on energy efficiency, recyclability or upgradeability, but efforts are too half-hearted.

"Manufacturers still have a long way to go," said Yannick Vicaire, Greenpeace International Toxics Campaigner. "Consumers should not have to choose between a toxic-free product or an energy-efficient one.

Greenpeace said the Sony Vaio TZ11 notebook, the Sony Ericsson T650i mobile phone and the Sony Ericsson P1i PDA were far greener than most products. However, each of these 'greenest' products scored just over half the possible 100 points available.



◀ Sony's Vaio TZ11 won plaudits, but it was damningly faint praise



Developers remain wary of Microsoft

The jury remains out on the implications of one of Microsoft's most important announcements in years – that the company plans to open up its software to open-source developers.

The software giant surprised the whole industry when it recently promised a complete change of heart on how it deals with developers, saying that it would give them far greater access to the technical details about how its software works and how other programmers can interact with the Windows operating system. The normally closely guarded company posted 30,000 pages of technical details on its website. According to Microsoft, these details were "previously available only under a trade secret licence".

The idea of an 'open' Microsoft has major implications for computer users because it could allow more developers to write software that interacts with our PCs' operating systems. More developers should mean more innovation.

Nearly all consumer software needs to use application programming interfaces (APIs) to communicate with the rest of the software on your computer, and Windows is the most important part of the equation.

In the past, many smaller developers have been scared off from writing software that interacts with Microsoft's ubiquitous computing platforms, mainly because the company can be extremely litigious when it comes to protecting its assets. That, says Microsoft, is all in the past. It promises not to sue open-source developers for development or non-commercial distribution of implementations of Microsoft's protocols. "These developers will be able to use the documentation for free to develop products," it said. "Companies that engage in commercial distribution of these protocol implementations will be able to obtain a patent licence from Microsoft."

So far, so good. However, there are plenty of suspicions going around, and programmers and politicians remain highly sceptical. All are maintaining a watching brief on how, when and, most importantly, if Microsoft will actually make these changes.

The announcement was barely made before members of the European Commission questioned whether this was simply another tactical marketing stunt from Microsoft, aimed at relieving pressure ahead of tricky competition court hearings.

"The Commission would welcome any move towards genuine interoperability," read an official statement. "Nonetheless, the Commission notes that today's announcement follows at least four similar statements by Microsoft in the past on the importance of interoperability."

"The Commission will therefore verify whether Microsoft is complying with EU anti-trust rules, whether the principles announced would end any infringement were they implemented in practice, and whether or not the principles announced today are in fact implemented in practice."

The reaction from commercial vendors was even more critical, saying that Microsoft was performing smoke-and-mirror tricks by saying the APIs were freely available, when really the APIs were useful only to non-professional programmers.

"Microsoft's announcement today appears carefully crafted to foreclose competition from the open-source community. How else can you explain a 'promise not to sue open-source developers' as long as they develop and distribute only 'non-commercial' implementations of interoperable products?" said a spokesperson for Red Hat Linux.

"This is simply disingenuous. The only hope for reintroducing competition to the monopoly markets Microsoft now controls is through commercial distributions of competitive open-source software products."

The company, whatever its motives, still has many detractors to convince.

NEWS ANALYSIS

Is Apple losing its moral high ground?

As Microsoft ponders how to implement its plans to embrace an open skies policy, observers are still wondering what sparked the decision.

Yes, it could be a philanthropic move; yes, it could be to appease European regulators. However, it could also have a subplot: Microsoft's continued struggle with Apple for world domination of the consumer electronics and computing worlds.

Microsoft has long been criticised for riding rough-shod over its rivals and using bully-boy tactics to subdue both rivals and customers.

Apple, meanwhile, was seen as a white knight in contrast, full of 'better user experience' and assertions that 'we're not Microsoft, so we must be nice'. Since the runaway success of the iPod, Apple has been eating into Microsoft's arena, and while much of that is down to its superb products, it is at least partly because of its super-slick marketing machine and a subservient media.

By embracing an open environment, Microsoft might just turn some perceptions on their heads, especially if Apple continues to shoot itself in the foot with the sort of aggressive tactics that would see Microsoft severely criticised.

Apple recently came under fire from many users and the open-source developer Mozilla when it furtively slipped its Safari browser into a download package alongside a routine iTunes update.

"What Apple is doing now with its Apple Software Update on Windows is wrong. It undermines the trust relationship great companies have with their customers, and that's bad – not just for Apple, but for the security of the whole web," claimed Mozilla CEO John Lilly. "Apple has made it incredibly easy – the default, even – for users to install ride-along software (Safari) that they didn't ask for, and maybe didn't want. This is wrong, and borders on malware distribution practices."

Apple angered privacy watchdogs as far back as 2006 when it installed a Mini Store on to iTunes users' computers so that it could target music adverts at customers. The little monitoring tool was initially installed without seeking permission.

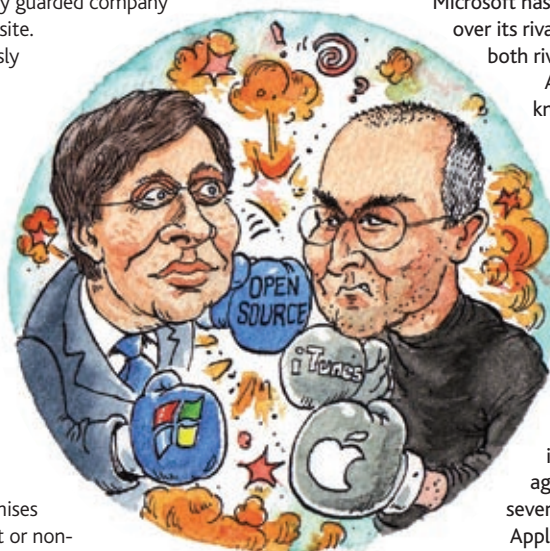
Then there's the company's habit of locking music players to iTunes, a move that has raised suspicions of anti-competitive behaviour. Music industry insiders have told *Computer Shopper* that they are worried about the growing power of Apple, and how they would support almost any alternative. This, of course, is the company that has recently released hardware such as the iPhone and MacBook Air (see this month's *What's New*, page 22) that precludes users changing the batteries.

There's nothing fundamentally wrong with what Apple's doing – it is standard business practice to make as much money as possible while gaining as much influence over customers as possible. They are also exactly the tactics for which the Apple community has lambasted Microsoft over the years.

Microsoft is far from perfect, but at least you know where you stand. The company is a capitalist wolf in wolf's clothing. Apple, on the other hand, is looking more like a jackal in a stylish white fleece.

One suspects Microsoft will use any change in perception to its own advantage. Touting its 'open' policy as inclusive to all, Bill Gates might just muster enough support from other players in the computing, electronics and music industries to form a posse to put Apple in its place.

Stewart Mitchell
Correspondent



IN BRIEF

BUG STOPS WHERE?

Microsoft has admitted that the bug that's corrupting data for Windows Home Server users won't be fixed until June at the earliest – six months after it was discovered. The bug can corrupt data during file editing or transfers in several popular applications, including Windows Vista Photo Gallery, Windows Live Photo Gallery, Microsoft Office Outlook 2007, Microsoft Money 2007, Intuit QuickBooks and BitTorrent client uTorrent.

DISC OF THE DAY

Optical storage manufacturer Verbatim has announced blank Blu-ray discs that will double storage capacity. Available from June, the discs push capacity up from 25GB to 50GB, but at only 2X write speeds, so filling a disc could take a while.

BATTERY PRICES TO RISE

Dell has said that a fire at a major South Korean supplier of laptop batteries, LG Chem, is responsible for an increase in prices. The fire has caused a supply shortage, which has led to price increases. Exact figures have yet to be released, but the company hopes to work with other suppliers to limit any further price increases.

BE AIMS FOR BIG TIME

Be Unlimited, the high-speed ADSL2+ specialist ISP, says it plans to expand its network coverage by 15 per cent. The broadband provider, which offers speeds of up to 24Mbit/s, says it will unbundle another 400 exchanges to bring 2 million more homes into its catchment area, making it the biggest ADSL2+ provider in the UK.

WIKIPEDIA GRABS RECORD DONATION

The Wikimedia Foundation has received an unprecedented \$3m (£1.5m) donation from a single organisation, twice the amount it raised in the whole of 2006.

Until now Wikimedia has operated on a limited budget, according to Sue Gardner, the Foundation's executive director, but the donation from the Arthur P Sloan Foundation will help the group to increase the quality of material on Wikipedia.

The money will be donated over a three-year period to fund the organisation and promotion of Wikipedia.

Mouse gets touchy-feely

Scientists aim to put greater control of computers in our hands with the development of haptic (touch-based) interfaces that act like a mouse on steroids.

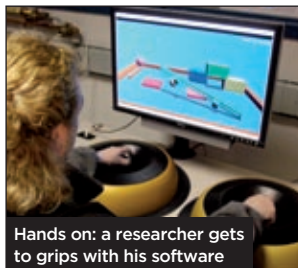
The controller would give users complete control of objects onscreen in every direction, including pitch, roll and vertical movements, rather than the basic forward-backward and sideways axis of a mouse.

The big breakthrough, though, is the ability to 'feel' the onscreen objects as if they were solid. "The magnetic levitation decouples the interface device from the mechanical world, eliminating friction, backlash, jump, sticking and other interfering effects, so that the

user feels only the artificial environment in complete accuracy down to the micro scale," said Rob Conway, project manager at Carnegie Mellon.

The scientists claim that users can perceive textures, feel hard contacts and notice even slight changes in position while using an interface that responds rapidly to movements.

At the heart of the magnetic levitation haptic interface is a bowl-shaped device called a flotor, which is embedded with six coils of wire. Electric current flowing through the coils interacts with powerful permanent magnets beneath, causing the flotor to levitate. A control handle is attached to the flotor.



Hands on: a researcher gets to grips with his software

Scientists seek smarter snaps

Photographers could soon bring a new dimension to their snaps, if researchers working on a 'super 3D' camera succeed in squeezing more than 12,000 lenses into a single camera.

Stanford University boffins are working on an image sensor that not only takes conventional 'flat' two dimensional pictures, but also creates a detailed 'depth map', measuring everything from the distance between a subject's nostrils and face to the space between Aunt Flo and her curtains in the background.

"It's like having a lot of cameras on a single chip," said Keith Fife, a graduate student working on the

project. "You can do things with that image that you weren't able to do with the regular 2D image. You can say, 'I want to see only the objects at this distance,' and suddenly they'll appear for you. You can wipe away everything else."

The researchers say the work could improve face-recognition technology, give robots better spatial vision and help them perform delicate tasks beyond their current abilities.

The good news for consumers could be cheaper digital cameras, because the scientists say the quality of a camera's main lens will no longer be so important.

CRAZE

What the web is really for

with Stewart Mitchell

World wide words

Language is an evolving beast, full of creative zeal that's shackled only by Darwinian selection. New words and phrases are given air as often as a vegetarian passes wind, but few linger as long. The web is changing that.

The internet hosts a legion of lexicographers who study every blogger's utterance for trendy words full of zeitgeist. For amateur word watchers, sites such as Urban Dictionary and Double-Tongued Dictionary are a constant source of words to drop into conversation if you want to sound hipper than you are.

Did you know, for example, that the term 'bullshot' describes those screenshots from computer games that have been doctored to make the graphics look better? Or that, conversely, 'chimp shot' (first coined by Gene Windell) describes the random photos most point-and-click photographers shoot in the hope that the law of averages will apply and, like a monkey typing Shakespeare, one of them will hit the mark.

If you move in advertising circles, you might want to up the ante with something as guff-tastic as 'buzz shackle', which means a real downer, as in "My fouled-up PC isn't just unreliable and ready for the scrap heap, it's a major buzz shackle."

Technology is making a massive contribution to modern linguistics, yet we repay it by dissing it with disdainful monikers. Whether we're flying an F-16 at Mach 6 or motoring in a Mondeo on the M25, the helpful voice giving directions is known, according to Double-Tongued Dictionary, as Bitchin' Betty. That's the thanks you get for advising people not to eject over Essex.

Like all good reference sources, the web's word-watchers have practical advice, too, even about social diseases. Computer gonorrhoea, Urban Dictionary informs us, is "when you try to download porn on to your roommate's computer because you broke yours, but download a few Trojans, and said computer becomes infected with such. Some sort of computer ointment needs to be applied to remove it."

The good thing about the freedom of contribution is that web dictionary definitions are so much more colourful than those dreamt up by crusty academics.

The Longman definition of a nerd, for example, is "someone only interested in computers and other technical things", while Urban Dictionary has it as "a four-letter word, but a six-figure income. Think Bill Gates, but typically on a smaller scale."